

Mental health promotion for children and young people

Mental health promotion focuses on enhancing the social, emotional and mental wellbeing and quality of life of children and young people.

Promotion interventions or activities apply to the whole population (e.g. within a whole school) regardless of their mental health status; or target specific groups or individuals, such as children or young people who are experiencing, or recovering from a mental illness.

Mental health promotion occurs in everyday settings including schools, early childhood education services, workplaces and community settings, and aims to address the underlying determinants (risk and protective factors) which can impact on a child's mental health.

Why is it important?

In Australia, for children aged 4–16 years, rates of a mental illness are estimated to be 14% (2006 statistics). It is also estimated that one in seven children will experience mental ill-health. Mental health promotion that begins early on in a child's life will significantly work towards ensuring children and young people have the best possible outcomes in terms of their mental health and wellbeing and development.

At the core of mental health promotion, is the concept of positive mental health. Health promotion works towards strengthening the protective factors (e.g. at least one positive relationship with an adult; parent, teacher etc) and reducing risk factors (e.g. bullying or social exclusion) in a child or young person's life; building their resilience and supporting development of positive mental health and wellbeing.

Risk factors are internal characteristics or external situations that increase the likelihood of mental ill-health. These can be offset by protective factors, which tend to decrease the chances of mental ill-health. Mental health

promotion activities often extend to improvements in physical health as well as productivity in school and at home.

What can teachers do?

Teachers are well placed to promote mental health among children and young people as they have frequent, quality contact during crucial times in a child's overall development. Mental health promotion strategies can focus on:

Creating a safe and supportive environment: focusing on a child's strengths, encouraging positive interactions with others, implementing mentoring or peer support for young people, providing support for young people returning to school with a mental illness.

Helping children develop personal skills: developing life skills training, positive coping skills, problem solving skills and good communication skills, encouraging involvement in extra-curricular activities, developing one key skill or interest of each child;

Developing organisational strategies with a promotion approach to support wellbeing: incorporating social inclusion practices, promoting acceptance of diversity, actively working to reduce stigma, developing anti-bullying programs, implementing school policies that respond to children's needs in a timely, age appropriate and culturally appropriate way.

Fostering partnerships within the community: building mental health literacy within the community, advocating for the needs of children and young people, creating links between local services, schools and parents, encouraging open communication between parents and schools.

Sources and Links

Kay-Lambkin, F. Kemp, E. Stafford, K. Hazell, T. (2007).
Mental health promotion and early intervention in early childhood and primary school settings: A review.
Journal of Student Wellbeing 1(1), 31-56.